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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: March 6, 1959

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SUBJECT: Problems of Germany and Berlin

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Axel Springer, German Newspaper Publisher  
Mr. Kramer, Assistant to Mr. Springer  
Mr. Livingston T. Merchant, EUR  
Mr. Alfred G. Vigderman, GER

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Mr. Springer said he had the impression that Khrushchev realized that he had gone a bit too far in precipitating the Berlin crisis. If the West is firm on the question of Berlin we have a chance actually to weaken Khrushchev's position. To do so we must take the offensive.

Mr. Springer said he thought that Khrushchev wants to negotiate trade arrangements with the United States for otherwise he cannot reach the target of his 7-year plan. He is a prisoner of his own 7-year plan. He has to give his people more consumer goods. Mr. Springer mentioned a conversation between SPD leaders Ollenhauer and Schmidt with the Soviet Ambassador to Bonn, in which Smirnov underlined the importance of the trade which takes place between East Germany and the Soviet Union.

The West Germans, Mr. Springer said, cannot start a war over the Eastern territories nor can they give up Eastern Germany. He is convinced that there is bound to be an uprising in East Germany if and when the Iron Curtain is positively lowered between the two parts of Germany. He made the following additional points:

1. Khrushchev wants and needs peace, although Khrushchev's behavior reminds one of Hitler.

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2. The Soviets, including Khrushchev, are concerned about the rearmament of Germany, particularly with nuclear weapons.

3. Khrushchev wants a stabilized border between Germany and Poland.

Mr. Springer said if East Berlin and West Berlin are finally sealed off from each other, contrary to the belief of some people that this would be a good thing, it would only be a short time before new and dangerous tensions would have been set up in Germany. He implied that the Soviets are interested in a reasonable solution to the German problem, even to the extent of giving up East Germany. This being the case, we must so arrange matters as to let the Soviets yield up East Germany in a way which will permit them to retain their prestige. Free elections are not necessarily the very first step to the reunification of Germany.

The most difficult point was military - how to give the Russians the security they demand. If the experts of Governments could come together to discuss this question, something might be accomplished. Until the final solution is arrived at, Allied forces must remain in Berlin. Finally, Mr. Springer proposed a large-scale program of aid by Germany to Poland and other countries.

Mr. Merchant summarized his views by saying that we are in as dangerous a period as we have been since Korea. He agreed that the Russians did not want a war and judged the risk of war was in inverse ratio to our willingness to face a war. On trade, it was clear that Khrushchev was not interested in trading with us on any terms that we could possibly accept.

Mr. Merchant agreed that we should be flexible, but within quite precise limits. When our essential interests are concerned, we must be very firm.

There is plainly now no price we would regard as a safe price, that we could pay for what the Russians might demand for reunification. This situation, however, will change, and on this subject we can modify to a degree what we have offered in the past. Finally, Mr. Merchant said that, contrary to what is a common opinion in many quarters, it was wrong to assess Western policies as having failed and Soviet policies as always successful. We have, in fact, accomplished tremendous things over the last ten years. The fact that 17% of the population of East Germany have left East Germany indicates in a practical way how successful Western policy has been. He thought that the West Germans didn't really have enough self-confidence in what they have achieved.

The conversation concluded with Mr. Springer emphasizing that the people on the other side of the Iron Curtain must not be left without hope.

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